

Jun-1997

Happy Birthday, Canada: Some Reflections on 130 Years of Nationhood

Andrew C. Holman

Bridgewater State College, a2holman@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Holman, Andrew C. (1997). Happy Birthday, Canada: Some Reflections on 130 Years of Nationhood. *Bridgewater Review*, 16(1), 7-10.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol16/iss1/6

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CANADA?

Some Reflections on 130 Years of Nationhood

Andrew Holman

On July 1, 1997, many Canadians will celebrate 130 years of nationhood. Other Canadians won't. This anniversary is an important one. It comes at a time when divisions in the Canadian polity and society are acute and threaten the very existence of a united country. In recent years, nationalists and doomsday prophets alike - academics, journalists, broadcasters, and others - have reached diametrically opposed forecasts for the country's future. Will Canada survive? Yes. But not because it is inevitable, preordained, or fated. Not even because it should survive. Canada will survive because unity offers the best of all available options for the majority of the country's inhabitants. Pragmatism motivated Confederation 130 years ago; pragmatism continues to provide the national "glue" that holds the country together.

Canada is a peculiar nation. Its identity is rooted in one fundamental paradox: while Canadians inhabit the same geopolitical space, they do not all cling to one common sense of nationalism, nor to one sense of national purpose. Unlike most countries, Canada is a nation that makes a virtue of difference. It is one country composed of five climatic and topographic

regions, ten provincial and two territorial governments, two official languages, dozens of thriving ethnic cultures, and even two national sports. While other countries, like the United States, have convincingly painted over the real socioeconomic and racial differences among their peoples that have the potential to divide them, Canadians have chosen to recognize and even celebrate their internal differences. The unofficial slogan of Canadian nationalism current in the 1960s betrayed this strange sense of being: "unity in diversity." Canada has never had one unified, common sense of nationalism, former University of Toronto historian Maurice Careless argued almost thirty years ago. It has, instead, a series of "limited identities." The results of this tendency, charming and commendable though they may be in the kinder, gentler and ostensibly more tolerant world of the 1990s, have been damaging to Canada. Canadians have an identity crisis. Their self-image has, in Robert Paul Knowles words, "a kind of indeterminacy."

Trying to define Canadian nationalism is akin to nailing jelly to the wall and since the country's founding in 1867, virtually all efforts to do so have foundered on the rocks of diversity. Limited identities have been the source of a number of challenges that the country has faced. The economic dominance of industrial central Canada over the West and the Atlantic provinces has created an enduring cleavage between "have-" and "have-not" regions, the results of which surface from time to time in political debate. Public concern over immigration, and the spectre of growing ethnic

enclaves in urban Canada emerges and re-emerges in public discourse with disturbing regularity. Advocates of "multiculturalism" (an official government policy since 1971) and stalwarts of the traditional vision of Canada as a W.A.S.P. nation occasionally do battle, invariably to a stalemate.

The most apparent division in Canada, however, dwarfs all of the others. Canada is a nation rent by language. It is made up of a majority of English-speakers, most of whom reside in the nine provinces and two territories outside of Quebec, and a minority of French-speakers, most of whom reside inside Quebec. The territorial division reinforces the linguistic one. Quebec is the ancestral homeland of Canadian francophones and in recent years has become the object of a vocal and aggressive movement for separation from the rest of Canada. Many *quebecois* have come to see themselves as a powerless colony of English Canada, stigmatized by their differences in lan-



"HOME, SWEET HOME."

Canada's Entente - a depiction from the late 19th century.

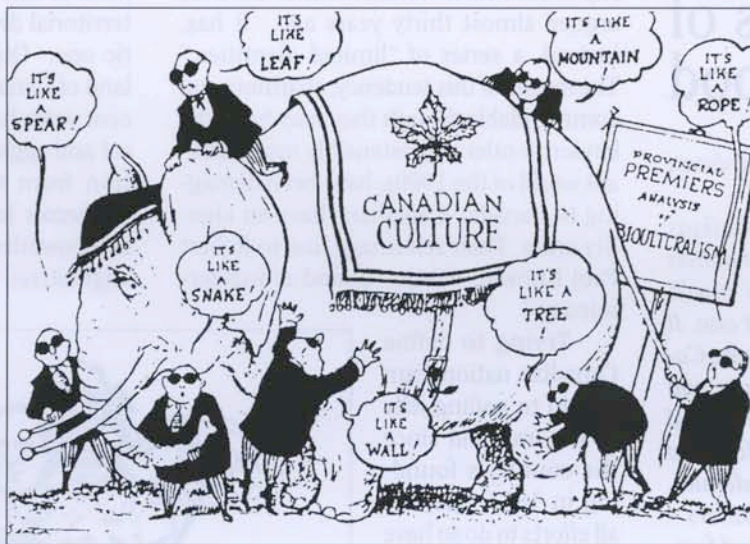
guage and culture. For them, separation from Canada is a panacea. Free to determine their own cultural, economic, and international policies, *quebecois* can themselves become at last their own distinct and mature nation. In two province-wide referenda, in 1980 and in 1995, the question of separation from Canada was put to the Quebec electorate, resulting in only a narrow defeat of the separatists' request to pursue more independence. The current Quebec provincial government promises another referendum, moreover, by the year 2000. This issue, clearly, is the most salient one now facing Canadians and, arguably, the most serious test that Canada and Canadian nationalism have ever encountered.

The Quebec question is, plainly, a *political* question and, not surprisingly perhaps, discussions on this issue have been dominated by those mavens of all things political: journalists and political scientists. Their discussions have been very useful and insightful. Journalists, on one hand, have focused their analyses most profitably on the idiosyncracies and personal philosophies of the main players in this conflict: the various Prime Ministers and provincial premiers whose jobs it has been to navigate through these rough waters. Political scientists, more objective and distant, have aimed their questions at current political structures. Will Canada's Constitution allow Quebec to separate? Can federalism be rebuilt to satisfy Quebec's demands? What would Canada look like after Quebec's departure?

These are essential perspectives and questions to consider. What they lack, however, is context; the kind of context (I'll state here with unabashed immodesty) that really lies only in the realm of history. Unfortunately, Canadian historians until very recently have been AWOL on the question of Canadian nationalism and Quebec separation. "At a time when

the country needed them most," historian Michael Bliss noted in 1992, "Canadian historians were occupied elsewhere, studying topics and agendas not related in the slightest way to the crisis with which most of the nation was wrestling." But it is in Canada's history, that perhaps the most illuminating evidence exists for the study of the Quebec question.

Canada is many things, but above all it is a pragmatic country that was formed for pragmatic reasons. This statement, as simply put as it is, has profound meaning for the Quebec question. The French language and culture in Canada has survived



Canadian nationalism - a "kind of indeterminacy"

and thrived because of the efforts of French-speakers to preserve and maintain them, but also because it was eminently impractical to do away with them. How did they get into this mess? Might understanding the history of French-English relations hold some clues to the nature of the problem? Perhaps a little context is in order.

The French were the first white Europeans to settle successfully and permanently in the part of North America that became known as Canada. The voyages of explorers Jacques Cartier (1534-35; 1541) and Samuel de Champlain (1605, 1608) laid claim to this territory for France and set the foundations for the establishment of a formal French colony in the New World. From 1663 until 1760, the fore-

bears of Quebec's current francophone population established a prosperous economy and a series of flourishing communities on the shores of the St. Lawrence River - New France, an official province of France. The timing of their arrival and the depth of their accomplishments have important meaning in the current debate. As the first European implant in that part of the world, to many the French language and culture deserve protection and its precedence must be observed.

In 1760, the aims and hopes for a French-governed nation in North America came crashing down heavily with the fall of New France to the British during the Seven Years War. This part of the war has been memorialized (mostly by anglophone writers) in histories of the valiant fighting in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and in Benjamin West's famous painting of the fallen British hero, James Wolfe, cut down cruelly while leading his men to victory over the French and *canadiens*. More significant was another fact: after 1760, Quebec - a series of settlements dotting the shores of the St. Lawrence and numbering about 55,000 souls, 95 per cent of them French-speaking - was now a British possession and the French *canadiens* were a conquered people.

La Conquête - the conquest of New France - was perhaps the most significant and formative event in Quebec history and it bears considerable meaning for the current crisis. It ushered in the first British effort to assimilate the French. Quebec's first British Governor, James Murray, was given a directive from the King to make the colony's official language English, outlaw the Roman Catholic Church and French civil law, and destroy the inhabitants' traditional feudal land tenure system. By the late 1760s, however, it became apparent that the *canadiens* would not be dispossessed of their language and culture so easily. In these years a passive resis-

tance to British efforts to assimilate them emerged, a spirit which historian Michel Brunet dubbed *la survivance*. Moreover, the expected arrival of British colonists from Britain and New England - the tide expected to "flood the French" - never flowed. Assimilating the French, quite simply, was not practical; so much so that the British government formally reinstated the use of French language, feudal land tenure, and French civil law through the passage of the Quebec Act in 1774. Contented with this good judgment, the *canadiens* spurned in the following year the overtures of American revolutionaries to join them in their quest to throw off the yoke of British oppression. From a very early date, the French-speaking *canadiens* and their British neighbors established and lived under a fair and lasting cultural *entente*.

It is this *entente* which has weathered numerous political storms over the last two hundred years but has survived, happily, because of the inherent pragmatic logic of cultural coexistence as opposed to assimilation or any sort of "melting pot" notion. In the 1830s, hundreds of French-speaking inhabitants in Quebec (then called Lower Canada) took up arms in rebellion against the autocratic, English colonial government in an attempt to wrestle more real power for their elected (and largely French-speaking) legislature from the appointed (and wholly English-speaking) executive branch. The rebellion was easily quelled but created enough concern in the mother country to warrant a special government commission, led by John George Lambton, the Earl of Durham. "I expected to find a contest between a government and a people," noted "Radical Jack" in his influential but perfunctory 1839 report. "I found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state." His solution - a foreign solution - was to unite the mostly French colony of

Lower Canada with its English-speaking neighbor, Upper Canada (now Ontario), in a vain return to the assimilationist policy of the early 1760s.

United into one province (the United Canadas, 1841-1867), with one legislature and with increasing numbers of British immigrants arriving, surely it was only a matter of time before English-speakers would swamp the French, and the colony became unicultural - right? Wrong.

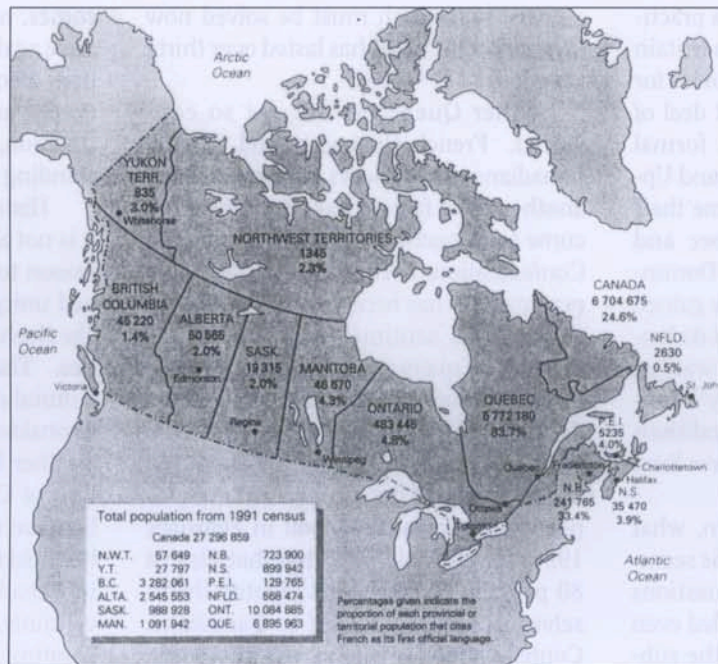
The *entente* vindicated, pragmatism once again won the day.

Even more profound and symbolic, however, were the circumstances surrounding the birth of Canada as an independent, self-governing Dominion in 1867. Here, too, it was practical considerations, not an attachment to abstract theory nor "universal" principles that motivated the union of British North American colonies into a distinct political entity. Canada had no Paine, no Jefferson, no Hamilton. Its statesmen were not the clear-thinking, enlightenment idealists of the eighteenth-century, but practical, workmenlike managers of the stolid mid-Victorian era.

The Dominion of Canada was formed by the union of three former British colonies - New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and the United Canadas. They were moved to do so not by the "Laws of Nature" nor by reference to "self-evident truths," but by more immediate and pressing concerns: a need to secure markets and resources in a world committed precariously to "free trade"; and a concern for military defence, at a time when some American

"hawks" wished the Union to turn its army northward after it had finished off the Confederacy and when British officials threatened repeatedly to withdraw its military commitment to its colonies. Confederation was motivated, moreover, by political deadlock in the United Canadas: increasingly, legislators in English-speaking Upper Canada and in French-speaking Lower Canada each desired the freedom to pass laws specific to their locations without interference from the other side.

Confederation was, as such, both a marriage and a divorce. It had the tenor, more specifically, of an *arranged* marriage, and the Canadian Constitution (passed on July 1, 1867 as the British North America Act), unlike its American counterpart, reads very much like a pren-



Canada's francophone population, 1990's

Durham and other British thinkers failed to understand the practical considerations of colonial politics on the ground. Morally, in the heady days of "democratic rage," it would be unconscionable to govern a population (still a majority throughout the 1840s) against its wishes. Practically, with French-speakers holding over 40 per cent of the legislature's seats, it would be virtually impossible to pass legislation without at least some French support. The lesson was plain. The French fact had to be recognized as a permanent presence and incorporated into the structures of political power. By 1850, government cabinets included French- and English-speakers, the capital city rotated between French and English locations, and both languages were employed in public

uptial agreement. It contains very little prefatory prose, and focuses on brass tacks - the terms of union and the specific powers granted to national and provincial governments. With very little variation, these arrangements were accepted by all of the colonies that subsequently chose to enter the marriage: Manitoba (1870), British Columbia (1871), Prince Edward Island (1873), Saskatchewan and Alberta (1905), and Newfoundland (1949).

In other ways, Confederation was a divorce. It was most apparently a practical separation agreement between Britain and her colonies, and one that allowed for the Dominion to exercise a good deal of freedom. In addition, it was a formal break-up between Lower Canada and Upper Canada, each of which became their own separate provinces (Quebec and Ontario, respectively) in the new Dominion. As a province, Quebec hereby gained the means to preserve and protect its language and culture. The entente was extended and codified in the country's Constitution. And it is under these conditions that Quebecers and Canadians have lived ever since.

Given this background, then, what does Quebec want? Why upset this seemingly blissful apple cart? These questions are important ones and have baffled even the most insightful thinkers on the subject. No one answer can be given, and for good reason. Quebecers, as a whole, do not want one thing; they want different things.

Some Quebecers - an important, and particularly vocal minority - want to be freed of their commitments to and relationship with the rest of Canada. These folks - the separatists - have been remarkably successful in the past thirty years in getting out their message: French Quebec is itself a distinct nation, and for all the guarantees of linguistic and cultural protection it enjoys within Confederation, their full potential as a community will not be realized until they have established their own separate state. In the impetuous days of the 1960s, many of these Quebecers likened their case to post-colonial regimes in Africa and Asia, and sought similar independence from its own "for-

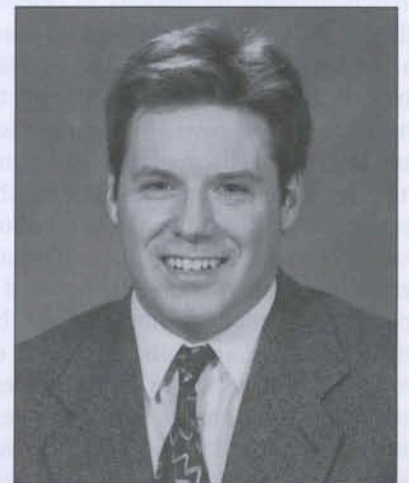
eign" oppressor; to become *maîtres chez nous* - masters in our own house. The cause was appealing and gave birth in 1966 to a perennial separatist political party - *le parti québécois* (PQ) - which under the guidance of its originator, René Lévesque and its current leader Lucien Bouchard, became and remains the main vehicle and the loudest champion of French language rights. To sustain the movement for separation, however, the PQ has construed the situation in Quebec as a crisis; one which must be solved now (even though "now" has lasted over thirty years).

Other Quebecers are not so convinced. French Quebecers and English Canadians don't always understand one another. That fact is clear. But most have come to respect each other's differences. Confederation, born of and sustained by pragmatism, has become comfortable for many. This sentiment has been made plain by the many public opinion polls that have surveyed the views of French-Canadians towards English Canada, and vice-versa, with nauseous repetition since the 1960s. Some of the most recent ones report telling results. A poll in February 1996, for example, reported that almost 80 per cent of Quebecers identify themselves as Quebecers *and* as Canadians. Confederation for Quebec has, moreover, become profitable for most. More to the point, it has been profitable for francophone businessmen since the 1960s, and not just for the handful of prominent entrepreneurs like Paul Desmarais of Power Corp. but for myriad small business owners as well. French Canadians are in control, in Quebec, of a thriving, modern, industrial economy.

Recently, the question of Quebec's potential secession has been referred to the Supreme Court of Canada to test the assumption that the province can legally part company with Canada if it wishes (Canada's Constitution has no formal provision for secession). The reference, however, may be moot. The current federal government position on the issue is straight-forward: Quebec can separate, provided a majority of Quebecers express the desire to do so in a clearly-worded ref-

erendum. The wording of the past two referendum questions was patently unclear; one in five Quebecers who voted in favor of negotiations towards separation had the misconception that a sovereign Quebec would remain a province of Canada! Eighty per cent believed that Quebec could continue to use the Canadian dollar as its currency. If the question is to be considered fairly, all of the cards must be placed on the table. But when they are, when the next referendum comes, and it will soon, separatists will once again be facing a formidable opposition: a body of pro-union voters and supporters ardently against separation *and* a tradition, centuries old, of cultural understanding and tolerance.

History can explain many things, but it is not a predictive art. Even so, there is reason to have confidence in the continued unity of Canada. Educated nations, like elephants, have long collective memories. The erasure of the long history of cultural *entente* in Canada would involve a considerable amount of whitewash, and a rather large brush. The De-confederation of Canada is unlikely to take place because it defies the historical logic that has held the French and English together in Canada for so long. These thoughts, certainly, are the ones that I will be celebrating on July 1, 1997. ❧



Andrew Holman is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and a Member of the Canadian Studies Program.